

Interview With Vice Adm. Bobby R. Inman, Former Deputy Director, CIA

U.S. Intelligence Agencies "Still Suffering From Scars"

It has taken a severe buffeting in recent years, but the nation's intelligence community now is bouncing back, says a top authority in this size-up of the Central Intelligence Agency's strengths and weaknesses.

Q Admiral Inman, the American intelligence community is emerging from a decade of turbulence—scandals, investigations and other embarrassments. Just how does it stand today?

A We have not yet recovered from all the buffeting of the last 10 years. We are still suffering from the scars.

If one only had to worry about the central front of Europe and the danger of massive hordes of Soviet troops crossing that line, then our intelligence is good. Not just good—superb. But if you believe, as I do, that the next decade will be dominated by competition for raw materials, markets and influence in unstable Third World nations, our capabilities are very marginal at best.

Q What do you now see as major strengths and weaknesses of the intelligence community?

A We're at our best in picking up warnings about a major use of Soviet force outside their borders. We understand Russia's military establishment. We can count what they have, understand how they operate it, how they train, how they use it. That, essentially, is the good news.

Q And the bad news?

A When you turn to the rest of the world, we are very restricted. We're reasonably good in parts of the world where there's been conflict for a number of years—the Middle East, Korea. But when you move away from there, to our allies or neutral countries, our knowledge is very thin—at times pathetically thin.

Q What specific example of this weakness can you cite?

A If we had known in more detail the economic situation confronting our allies, the government might have handled the Siberian-natural-gas-pipeline problem somewhat differently. The intelligence community did not know enough, or speak strongly enough, about the economies of France, Germany, Britain, which were going to dictate their reactions. You've got to get detailed information in front of policymakers before a decision is made.

Trying to block the pipeline was a sound idea but one that should have been pushed three years ago—before contracts were signed, equipment produced and ships ready to sail. We did not have the in-depth knowledge to prompt smart decisions.

Q What is the administration doing to remedy problems at the Central Intelligence Agency?

A When the new administration came to office in

early 1981, we were chartered to lay out the long-term needs of U.S. intelligence and what would be required to meet those needs.

The assessments and recommendations were put to the President, and his reaction

was that he didn't see how we could afford not to do all of these things and that it was necessary to get started.

The investment ranges across the board—from clandestine human intelligence to overt human intelligence and various technical approaches. We are building redundancy in the technical-espionage systems so that if there is one failure, we won't suddenly lose all capability.

We are emphasizing analysis of information more than collection of it. You can collect all that you want, but, ultimately, it's the number and quality of analysts in CIA and the other agencies that are going to make the difference in whether you really can provide high-quality, finished intelligence to leaders.

This rebuilding cycle is going to take a long time, simply because you do not have skilled analysts waiting out there to be hired. They must have great in-depth knowledge on countries all over the world, with language abilities to read the local press. You have to develop that kind of talent, and it takes years.

Q Are you concerned about charges that the Reagan administration is drawing the CIA too deeply into what are essentially political matters?

A I think we have to run the risk of politicization to make certain that the intelligence being produced is relevant to the critical issues we face. If you leave it to its own devices, the intelligence community will write scholarly tomes that can fill your walls. The political leader has to be pretty critical of what he reads; otherwise, CIA reports will become longer, more abstract, more academic and thus have little value.

So I'll run the risk of having a very close dialogue between the decision maker and the one who is going to produce intelligence. You have to have faith that the CIA's professionals are strong enough to make straight calls.

Q Some say that CIA Director William Casey is practicing another form of politicization—pressuring analysts to tailor reports to support positions already taken by political leaders—

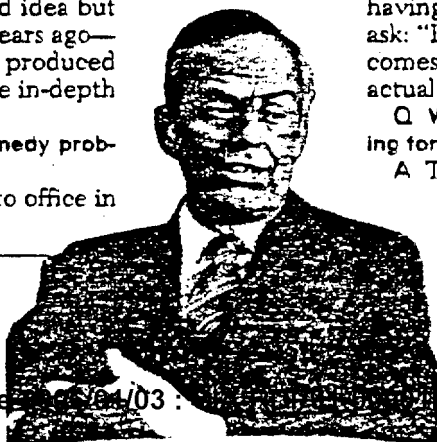
A I've seen the charge, and it's just false. I never once saw any effort to force the analysts to go back and redo their analysis to fit some view picked up somewhere else. Bill Casey is a man of strong views, and on any given day he may well arrive at the office with a strong view on an issue from having read something the night before. He will ask: "Is this right, or is it not right?" If the report comes back saying, "That's not right; here are the actual facts," his view changes.

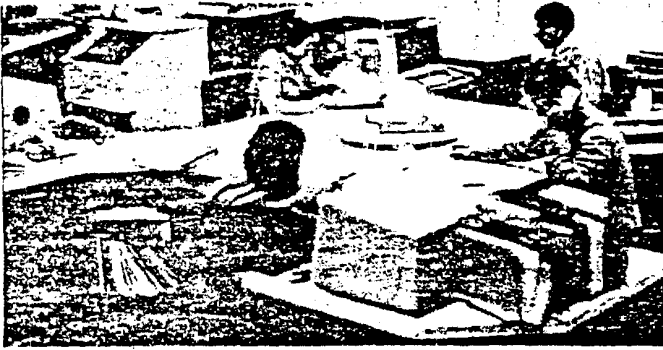
Q What do you think of assassination, overthrowing foreign leaders or milder forms of covert action?

A The CIA performs three functions: Foreign intelligence—espionage in other nations; counterintelligence—blocking some other nation's espionage effort, and covert action. I have no difficulty with the first two functions. But the potential value of covert action is greatly overemphasized, and problems tend to be neglected. I am not an enthusiast.

Q What are your objections to the use of such tactics?

Vice Admiral Inman, 51, resigned from the CIA in June. Before holding that post, he directed the National Security Agency. During his career he also headed naval intelligence and was director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.





Operations center at the CIA. "We are emphasizing analysis of information more than collection of it," says Inman.

A I'm not convinced that changing an unfriendly government necessarily puts you in a better position. An unfriendly government that you know may be easier to deal with than one you've helped install that does not have the capacity to govern. We've had this problem before.

Q When is such covert action, in your view, justified?

A When the Soviets use armed forces outside their own borders or when they use proxy troops outside their own borders, covert action can raise the cost for them and may discourage them from expanding. And where Russia mounts a major propaganda campaign to shape the attitudes of other countries, covert action to counter them can be useful.

At that point, I've run the gamut of where I believe covert action can be truly useful to the United States.

This is the single most divisive issue in trying to create a consensus on intelligence policy. In the public perception, covert action is our major function. In reality, it is a minuscule part of our total effort.

Q What about the recent espionage case in Britain—the discovery of a Soviet agent in its secret communications agency? Is that as damaging as some reports suggest?

A That's a difficult one for me to comment on because it is so highly classified. The claim is that this agent has caused as much damage to Western security as Kim Philby, who was particularly dangerous since he was at the top of Britain's intelligence service. I don't believe it. I do not believe this can be the case if he was, as described, a translator.

Translators are compartmented, confined to one area. Messengers and communicators are the people who do the worst damage because their access is so broad. A translator normally is limited to a specific location and task.

Make no mistake: Any enemy agent in an intelligence organization is damaging for what he can reveal about people who are operating inside, what they might be working on, even just informed speculation. But I cannot conceive of circumstances where some translator could create the problems caused by Philby, who exposed whole human spy networks of ours.

Q On this question of compromising secrets: How much are American intelligence capabilities damaged by leaks of classified information?

A I consider the hemorrhage of leaks, going back to the middle '60s, to be enormously damaging to the way this whole government functions. Where the U.S. intelligence community specifically is concerned, I place leaks into three categories. The first comes from the individual who feels abused by the system—didn't get a promotion or whatever. He is responsible for the documents that come in over the transom, where some journalists get much of their material. This is damaging, but usually in a very limited way.

The second category of leaks comes from those who are either out to sell a program or to shoot down somebody else's program or policy. Now, there's an ironic feature to that. In their zeal either to sell a new system or new policy or new program or to shoot down somebody else's, the intelligence

is often distorted. It's the only effective disinformation that this government practices. It must just drive the Soviets up the wall.

The third category, and the one that is most damaging to intelligence sources, comes from the senior official of government who is swamped with a vast flow of classified documents and doesn't know exactly how the information is acquired, what the code words really mean, or even the potential damage of leaks. He gossips, he talks. Those are the ones that are often exactly accurate and most revealing of how we got the information.

I don't know how you deal with this in a free society. The best way may be by firing a few people. It isn't that difficult to find out who's leaking. When you see some really sensitive stuff oozing out, fire somebody. That will have an amazing impact on the others.

Q Do you think that legitimate intelligence activities are inhibited by congressional oversight and review?

A In the middle '70s, they clearly were. There is in the bureaucracy, as probably in other institutions, a tendency to protect yourself against the prospect of having made a mistake that will damn you. You start with a set of rules that are already very restrictive, and then everybody in implementing them adds a little extra for caution for themselves. You get down to where the poor operator has got an inch and a half thick "Thou shalt nots" that require a lawyer to interpret. That produces reticence and timidity.

I think we've gotten that pretty well wrung out of the system. There are enough checks to make sure that nobody is going to subvert the system or to do something that is clearly against executive order or law. Will we ever make a mistake? Yes, sometimes. But it will be caught, and corrective action will be taken.

Q Has the intelligence community overreacted to the restrictions—particularly during this administration—as critics claim?

A There's clearly that perception, but it's not the reality. Look at our support for laws against deliberate disclosure of the names of U.S. intelligence agents. The executive branch persuaded Congress that there is a genuine need, largely for morale purposes with the CIA.

We want limits on the Freedom of Information Act. It's a major time consumer that diverts talented people to sort through mountains of materials. More than that, it has a severe impact on our friends abroad who might cooperate but do not because they believe there is a likelihood that their cooperation would be disclosed in the press. It's the perception of people who could be helpful to us. That is where the real damage comes. One has to look to Congress for effective oversight, not the Freedom of Information Act, where the intelligence community is concerned.

Q Many of the nation's scientists who deal with secret technological information consider it essential to carry on discussions with their foreign counterparts. In your view, is it possible—or desirable—to restrict their activities?

A I have finally come down to taking the position that it's neither feasible nor probably even desirable to try to restrict dialogue and exchange on basic research. It may be necessary in some very narrow fields—nuclear power, cryptanalysis—but these are exceptions.

One can more easily try to draw the line if you look at advanced technology. There is where another country has the potential for bringing something to bear in a shorter time frame that could have a direct impact on our own defense capabilities or needs. And there I think we are going to have to have constraints in the foreign dialogue.

It should be voluntary. We clearly should try a voluntary mechanism rather than one of regulation or legislative constraint. But we will never solve this problem completely—not if we want to remain an open society.